

suggested that the end of rioting marked the beginning of “an era of prosperity which has advanced the city greatly commercially, and this era still holds forth and is bringing increased progressiveness and prosperity to Wilmington.”⁸⁴ The differentiation between past political conditions and contemporary conditions suggested that the city had changed hands without referring to the means or the cost of the takeover. The city’s businessmen advocated silence on the issue, but the local mentality attributed prosperity to the violence.

As the city’s leading white businessman and amateur historian, James Sprunt chronicled the event in his landmark history of the Cape Fear published in 1916 and still used as a standard reference by many historians:

*The year 1898 marked an epoch in the history of North Carolina, and especially the city of Wilmington. Long continued evils, borne by the community with a patience that seems incredible, and which it is no part of my purpose to describe, culminated, on the 10th day of November, in a radical revolution, accompanied by bloodshed and a thorough reorganization of social and political conditions. It was only under stern necessity that the action of the white people was taken, and while some of the incidents were deplored by the whites generally, yet when we consider the peaceable and amicable relations that have since existed, the good government established and maintained, and the prosperous, happy conditions that have marked the succeeding years, we realize that the results of the Revolution of 1898 have indeed been a blessing to the community.*⁸⁵

Sprunt’s narrative reflected the traditional story of the violence as developed by participating and leading whites to justify

their actions. This concept – that the armed overthrow, or revolution, was necessary to restore order and prosperity to the city – has become the standard belief for many as to why the violence occurred on November tenth. However, after careful study it is clear that such a simple explanation cannot suffice for all members of the community nor was it truly the reason for the violence.

The causes and effects of the riot, neatly packaged by Wilmington’s elite became the standard story for inclusion in all statewide histories by historians such as R. D. W. Connor, J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton, and Samuel A. Ashe. These men chronicled the history of the state during the first half of the twentieth century, and their prevailing assumptions regarding Wilmington’s African American population were clouded by previous authorship and close association with some who participated in the coup and violence.

As generations of Wilmingtonians have shared the stories of 1898, historical fact and fiction have merged, creating alternative narratives that combine hearsay, fact, fictionalized accounts, and episodes from other parts of the city’s history. An often repeated story is that the heads of black men who died on November 10 were placed on pikes along the major entrances to the city. No historical data has been found to prove such activity happened in 1898. However, such displays were found in and around the city in 1831 following the hysteria that blossomed in the region as a response to the 1831 Nat Turner insurrection in Virginia.⁸⁶ Harry Hayden fueled the confusion when, in his works, he referenced the 1831 events. Hayden stated that blacks and “white agitators” would have done well to delve into the city’s history, remarking

⁸⁴ “The ‘Riot’ Seven Years Old,” Reaves Clippings, New Hanover County Public Library.

⁸⁵ James Sprunt, *Chronicles of the Cape Fear River, 1660-1916*, 554-555.

⁸⁶ Charles Edward Morris, “Panic and Reprisal: Reaction in North Carolina to the Nat Turner Insurrection, 1831 *North Carolina Historical Review* (January 1985) 62:29-52.